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U.S. Attorney Machen Outlines Anti-Violence Strategy, Combining Enforcement Efforts With Crime Prevention - Criminals Held Accountable as Office Builds Partnerships With Citizens -

WASHINGTON - U.S. Attorney Ronald C. Machen Jr. said today that the office's anti-violence initiatives have led to the convictions of more than 20 people so far this year in homicide cases and another 175 defendants on weapons charges, as well as a deeper partnership with people in all parts of the city to join law enforcement in combating crime.

The convictions reflect one part of a comprehensive approach taken by the U.S. Attorney's Office to combat and prevent crime in the District of Columbia. Under U.S. Attorney Machen's leadership, the office has engaged the public in discussions about ways to prevent crime, organizing more than 100 community events this year alone, including a youth summit. The office also has hosted events for ex-offenders, including a workshop to help them find jobs.

"We have matched vigorous prosecutions with vigorous engagement within our community," said U.S. Attorney Machen. "We are working more closely than ever with District of Columbia residents to address their concerns and to hold accountable the criminals that threaten their neighborhoods with violence. The steady clip of gun prosecutions this year illustrates our devotion to taking weapons and the felons who use them off of our city streets."

This month alone, four defendants were convicted of murder charges following trials in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. They included one man, Kerstan Leonard, who was convicted by a jury of first-degree murder and other charges in a December 2008 shooting that killed one woman and wounded two other people, all innocent bystanders.

Since January, at least 20 defendants have been sentenced to prison terms of 40 years or more for committing murders and other violent crimes in the District of Columbia. They include eight members of gangs. One defendant, William Cordova, was sentenced to a term of life plus 150 years for murder and other crimes that he committed while a member of the MS-13 gang.

Another, Jose Portillo, was sentenced to 137 years of incarceration in the 2008 killings of a Northwest Washington couple during a home invasion. And another, Seneca Benjamin, got a 105-year term for a 2009 shooting rampage that killed one person and wounded three others.

This week, Alfred Evans was sentenced to a 47-year prison term for the 2003 murder of a homeless man in Southeast Washington; Evans shot the victim as he begged for his life.

The U.S. Attorney's Office has targeted violent criminals with several new initiatives, including the creation of separate teams of prosecutors to investigate older, cold-case homicides and gang-related crimes. In addition, a veteran prosecutor is specializing in the use of DNA and forensic evidence, providing expert assistance in many cases involving violent crimes.

Over the past year, the U.S. Attorney's Office has prosecuted nearly 50 members of nine different gangs, including MS-13, in the U.S. District Court and in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. In the most recent case, three men associated with the Benning Terrace Crew were sentenced for obstruction of justice and related crimes. Prosecutors also have won convictions against criminals who robbed armored cars and committed crimes at banks, including one man who pled guilty to committing 11 bank robberies, and another who pled guilty to robbing or attempting to rob victims at nine ATMs in a one-month period last year.

As part of a push against gun crimes, more than 150 people have pled guilty since January in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia to charges of carrying a pistol without a license or other firearms offenses, and another 22 were convicted after trials.

Working with the Metropolitan Police Department, the FBI's Washington Field Office, and other law enforcement partners, the U.S. Attorney's Office has customized a local approach to a national anti-violence strategy created by Attorney General Eric Holder, a former U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia. The strategy uses a three-legged stool approach: one leg focuses on vigorous law enforcement; one invests in crime prevention programs, and one supports viable initiatives to help ex-offenders build new lives as law-abiding citizens in the community.

In the Barry Farm area of Southeast Washington, for example, the U.S. Attorney's Office is currently prosecuting, on federal charges, the leader, enforcer and other members of a drug ring; they are alleged to have engaged in murder and other crimes from 2006 until last year. In that same area, the U.S. Attorney's Office has held numerous community events, seeking to build a partnership with neighborhood residents in a continuing program that is based on the concept that residents must be willing to "Stand Up Today In Order To Save a Life Tomorrow."

Other initiatives have focused on providing information and resources to ex-offenders as they re-enter the community and educating the public and, in particular small business owners, about the challenges facing ex-offenders.

Along these lines, earlier this year, the U.S. Attorney's Office hosted a meeting with prospective employers to encourage them to hire ex-offenders, and also participated in or hosted a series of events focusing on offender re-entry, including a community forum in April entitled, "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes." The forum was designed to educate the public about the challenges facing women who are returning home after serving time in prisons or jails.

The U.S. Attorney's Office has organized more than 110 events throughout the District of Columbia so far this year. U.S. Attorney Machen has hosted two town hall meetings in recent months, working with leaders of the faith-based community. More than 200 teenagers attended the youth summit that took place June 24 at the Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC). That program featured a panel discussion on youth violence and talks by victims, ex-offenders, professional athletes from the National Football League, and a medical professional, as well as hip-hop and fraternity step show performances.

"Our aggressive efforts to remove dangerous offenders from our community go hand in hand with our work to help our young people avoid lives filled with crime and violence," said U.S. Attorney Machen. "By taking dozens of murderers and gun-toting criminals off the streets, we create safer neighborhoods where our children can thrive and reach their full potential."

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